

FROM SENTENCE TO TEXT

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Abstract: *We are used to applying the term text to any stretch of language which makes coherent sense in the particular context of its use. So conspicuous a linguistic reality, the text may be either spoken or written, either as long as a book or as short as a cry for help. Linguistic form is important but is by no means of itself sufficient to give a stretch of a language the status of text. For example a road – sign reading Dangerous Corner is an adequate text though comprising only a short noun – phrase. It is understood as an existential statement, paraphraseable as something like There is a dangerous corner near by, with such block language features as zero article, that are expected in notices of this kind. By contrast, a sign at the roadside with the same grammatical structure but reading Critical Remark is not an adequate text, because although we recognize the structure and understand the words, the phrase can communicate nothing to us as we drive by, and thus is meaningless.*

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1. Introductory Considerations

We are used to applying the term *text* to any stretch of language which makes coherent sense in the particular context of its use. So conspicuous a linguistic reality, the text may be either spoken or written, either as long as a book or as short as a cry for help. Linguistic form is important but is by no means of itself sufficient to give a stretch of a language the status of *text*. For example a road – sign reading *Dangerous Corner* is an adequate text though comprising only a short noun – phrase. It is understood as an existential statement, paraphraseable as something like *There is a dangerous corner near by*, with such block language features as zero article, that are expected in notices of this kind. By contrast, a sign at the roadside with the same grammatical structure but reading *Critical Remark* is not an adequate text, because although we recognize the structure and understand the words, the phrase can communicate nothing to us as we drive by, and thus is meaningless.

Far from being a matter of grammar alone, it is primarily by the choice of vocabulary that language connects us with the world beyond language. Moreover, lexical choice is constantly made use of to shape the internal cohesion of texts as obvious in the use of the hypernymically related *family*, *children*, *parents*, and *fruit*, *apple*, *Granny Smiths* in the following example:

I like my family to eat lots of fruit, and Granny Smiths are especially popular because this apple has a juicy crispness much enjoyed by the children and their parents alike.

Let us further exclude all aspects of text construction other than grammar and pragmatics features and their concomitant prosody and punctuation so as to focus our attention only on such a discourse problem as text – oriented place and time – relator issue.

2. Place and Time Relators

Textual structure requires firm orientation in respect to place and time. Consider the following example:

Years ago, I lived for a time in the Far East, where my father worked at a naval base. I've been back there once to look at our old home but that was after the base had closed.

In relation to the implicit *here and now* of the speaker and hearer, the text refers to one other location in space and two other 'locations' in time. We are impelled to imagine a remote place where for some long unspecified span in the past, there had existed a naval base. Within that period, for a shorter but also unspecified span, the speaker had lived there. Between the *here and now* reference point and the end of the unspecified span in the past, an interval is mentioned and narratively represented as without duration. It is noteworthy that the temporal and locational relations are clear though no dates or precise places are given: the *Far East* is *far* only from (say) Europe and it is *east* only in relation to somewhere that lies to the west of it; the time is *long ago* only in relation to now – it was itself *now* when the speaker lived in the Far East.

2.1. Place Relators. Ellipses and Pro – forms

2.1.1. Spatial Relations

As for spatial relations, some of them are firmly linked to grammatical expressions which are heavily exploited in textual structure. Thus, an opening question or statement will normally involve reference to location in space (as well as in time):

Where are you going tonight? (1)

It's ages since I was over there. (2)

On Tuesday evening, I was at the front door talking to a caller. Suddenly we heard a crash and two cars collided just opposite. We hurried across to see if we could help. One driver was scrambling out, bleeding profusely, and my visitor helped him over to the pavement. Then along came some people, running up the street. I dashed back in and phoned for help. When I went out again, the other driver was trying to move the car down the road a little and in to the side. (3)

In all three examples, spatial reference is essential, as well as orientation to the participants' *here*: *where* in (1) entails a *here* from which to set out; *over there* in (2) entails 'in contrast to here'. But let us look more closely at the part played by spatial reference (3), both in respect to orientation and to the structure of the narrative.

Even totally out of the context, the institutionalized phrase *at the front door* would be understood as referring to the main entrance of someone's home, whether this was a house or a small apartment. Likewise, *just opposite* is at once understood as *just opposite* to where the speaker and his visitor were standing. A road is implied by the car crash and in this context *across* means 'across the intervening space (of footpath and street)'. The *back in* signifies a return across this intervening space and *into* the speaker's home. The two instances of *out* are of sharply different reference: the first implicitly refers to emergence from the car, the second to re – emergence from the speaker's home (thus correlating with the earlier *back in*). The contrasting *up (the street)* and *down (the road)* are interesting in making spatial reference not necessarily in terms of relative elevation (though this is not excluded). The immediate contrast is in terms of orientation again, *up* indicating an approach towards the speaker (and his home), and *down* pointing out the converse. The cluster of spatial references provides a continuous set of coordinates in relation to a base (the speaker's home, though this is merely a pragmatic implication) as well as a coherent account of the movements involved in the narrative.

In a text where it was known that a physical slope was involved, *up/down (the street)* would be used with respect to this absolute and objective physical feature, and it would outweigh personal orientation. The latter could then be expressed by alternative means: *She went (away) up the street*; *They came down the street*. Contrast also: *They hurried up Fifth Avenue* (i.e. away from downtown Manhattan); *They sauntered down Fifth Avenue* (i.e. towards downtown Manhattan); *They walked along Fifth Avenue* (neutral as to direction).

2.1.2. Ellipses and Pro – forms

Where place relators operate in text structure, ellipsis is often involved:

He examined the car. The front was slightly damaged. (1)

The building was heavily guarded by police. The windows on the top level / at the top were covered with boards. (2)

The ellipped items in (1) and (2) are *of the car* and *of the building*, respectively. Often the ellipped items are not in the previous context, but are understood from the situational context (either accompanying the communication or established by the communication):

The traffic lights eventually changed. She walked across quickly. (3)

Across here implies *the road* or similar noun phrase.

A few place adverbs do not involve ellipsis: *here*, *there*, *elsewhere*, the relative *where*, and (in formal contexts) *hence*, *thence*, *hither*, and *thither*. They are pro – forms:

The school laboratory reeked of ammonia. Here, during the first week of the term, an unusual experiment had been conducted. (4)

All my friends have been to Paris at least once. I am going there next summer for the first time. (5)

As it may be easily noticed, *here* in (4) is a substitute for *in the school laboratory* and *there* in (5) for *to Paris*.

In sentences like *Stand there* and *Here it is*, the pro – forms may refer directly to the situational contexts without any linguistic mention of location, but with orientation to the speaker:

I'm glad to welcome you here, especially since at the last meeting I could not be there.

2.1.3. A Deeper Insight in the Spatial Reference Problem

Place relators may often be noticed to comprise two components, and most commonly these are a dimension or direction indicator plus a location indicator. The latter is usually an open – class noun (or proper noun), but its locational use is often institutionalized, making the whole expression quasi – grammatical. Examples:

at the window

on the ceiling

in the air

at the seaside

in town

off work

on board

on the way

Another common type of pairing is a distance indicator plus a dimension indicator; for example:

not far / further / farther + in, out, off, away, from

nearer + in

nearer + to + noun phrase

high(er) + up

low(er) + down

close + by

close + to + noun phrase

The partially antonymous *home* and *abroad*, *ashore* and *on board* are exceptional in combining the dimension and location factors:

After being out for a couple of hours, I'm now going (staying) home for the evening. (reference to personal residence)

After living (being / going) abroad, I like to come (be) home (= my own country) for a year or so.

Locational connections in relation to coherence are not merely a necessary feature of individual texts. It is customary in newspapers to group the otherwise separate news – item texts on a regional basis. So too in radio broadcasts, a place relator may serve to give some kind of coherence to otherwise unrelated stories:

They are worried that another strike could break out in the United States similar to the one that affected Canada's economy so seriously two years ago.

IN CANADA news is coming in of a plane accident near Toronto. The aircraft, a privately owned four – seater ...

The textual justification for *IN* is that a main focus on *Canada* would be misleading since *Canada* is in some sense 'already given'.

2.2. Time Relators

Like space, time has its lexically specific and labelled 'areas' and 'locations'. Along with open – class nouns, some of them – like places – are treated as proper nouns: *century, decade, year, 2005, February, week, day, Thursday, evening*, etc. Again like units of space, these nouns have an institutionalized and hence quasi – grammatical use. In addition to being elements in clause structure, they lend themselves to the connections and transitions of textual structure:

I've been working on this problem all year and I must find a solution before January when I'm due to go abroad for a month or so. (1)

Nouns of more general meaning are still more firmly harnessed for grammatical use:

I've been working for a long time. (2)

I'm going abroad for a while. (3)

She hasn't visited me for ages. (4)

In addition, therefore, to closed – class items like *afterwards*, we take account here of numerous open – class words which, though with clear lexical meaning, are largely used in the constant process of keeping track of the many and complex references that are necessary for coherent text. Since time passes irrespective of location (which need not change), temporal cues to periods, and to references *before*, *after*, *within*, and *during* these periods, are more inherently essential than locational cues.

Once a time reference has been established, certain temporal adjectives and adverbs may order subsequent information in relation to the time reference.

The temporal ordering situations would be the following:

a). Temporal ordering PREVIOUS to a given reference:

- ADJECTIVES: *earlier, former, preceding, previous, prior*

For example:

He handed in a good essay. His previous essays (i.e. 'those done earlier') were all poor.

- ADVERBIALS: *already, yet, before, beforehand, earlier, first, formerly, hitherto* (formal), *previously, so far, yet*; and phrases with pro – forms: *before that, before this, before now, before then, by now, by then, until now, until then, up to now, up to then*

For example:

I shall explain to you what happened. But first I must give you a cup of tea.

First is to be interpreted here as 'before I explain to you what happened'.

b). Temporal ordering SIMULTANEOUS with a given time reference:

- ADJECTIVES: *coexisting* (formal), *coinciding* (formal), *concurrent* (formal), *contemporary, contemporaneous* (formal), *simultaneous*

For example:

The death of the President was reported this afternoon on Cairo radio. A simultaneous announcement was broadcast from Baghdad.

Here *simultaneous* means 'simultaneous with the report of the death of the President on Cairo radio.'

- ADVERBIALS: *at this point, concurrently* (formal), *contemporaneously* (formal), *here, in the interim* (formal), *meantime, meanwhile, in the meantime,*

in the meanwhile, now, presently, simultaneously, then, throughout, and the relative when

For example:

Several of the conspirators have been arrested but their leader is as yet unknown. Meanwhile the police are continuing their investigation into the political sympathies of the group.

Here *meanwhile* means 'from the time of the arrests up to the present'.

c). Temporal ordering SUBSEQUENT to a given time reference:

- ADJECTIVES: *ensuing* (formal), *following*, *latter*, *next*, *subsequent* (formal), *succeeding* (formal), *supervening* (formal)

For example:

I left her at 10 p.m. and he was almost asleep. But at some later hour she must have lit a cigarette.

Here *later* might mean 11 p.m. but equally 4 a.m., a time otherwise called 'the early hours of the morning'.

- ADVERBIALS: *after*, *afterwards*, *(all) at once*, *finally*, *immediately*, *last*, *later*, *next*, *since*, *subsequently* (formal), *suddenly*, *then*; and the phrases *after that*, *after this*, *on the morrow* ('the day after')

For example:

The manager went to a board meeting this morning. He was then due to catch a train to London.

2.3. Tense, Aspect and Narrative Structure

As a further indication of the importance of time in language, all finite clauses (and many nonfinite ones) carry a discrete indication of tense and aspect. although the contrasts involved are severely limited in comparison with adverbial distinctions, they contribute to the contextual cohesion and progression. Compare the different implications in the second part of what follows:

She told me all about the operation on her hip.

It seemed to have been a success. (1)

It seems to have been a success. (2)

In (1), in accordance with our expectations with respect to sequence of tenses and backshift, the past ties the second part to the first, and thus, like this, derives its authority from the woman concerned: 'It seemed *to her*...'; that is, 'She was of the opinion that the operation had been successful'. The possibility of repudiation is therefore open: 'Unfortunately, this is not so.' In (2), by contrast, the present disjoins

the second part and may imply an orientation to the 'I' narrator: 'It seems *to me*...', 'I am of the opinion...'.

Alternation of past and present in this way is a regular mode of switching reference from the 'then' of the narrative reference to the 'now' of both the narrator and the hearer or reader (some items like parenthetical *you see* being confined to this 'now'):

As a child, I lived in Singapore. It's very hot there, you know, and I never owned an overcoat. I remember being puzzled at picture books showing European children wrapped up in heavy coats and scarves. I believe I thought it all as exotic as children here think about spacemen's clothing, you see. (3)

Let us consider the instances of past tense in this text: *lived, owned, thought*. Not merely are these verbs morphologically identical: the text actually represents the past as being referentially identical. All the verbs refer back to a stretch of time during which these things were true.

But past tenses need refer neither to the same time nor to stretches of time. With verbs which connote discrete actions, a narrative string of past tenses will be interpreted as referring to a sequence of events represented by the series of verbs as in the following example:

Do you want to hear about my adventures last Thursday? I got up at six, had some coffee, and set off for London. I took a taxi, arrived at Bucharest, started to check in my case, patted my pocket, and found – no ticket, no passport. Picked up my case, caught the underground, got another taxi, went to Galatz, arrived at my parents' front door, rushed in, and of course gave my poor family the shock of their lives. (4)

More usually, however, texts comprise much greater time – reference complexity than the previous examples show. They will have a mixture of state verbs and discrete action verbs; the narrative will weave backwards and forwards, with a mixture of tenses and aspects, of finite and nonfinite clauses, enabling the narrator to depart from the linear sequence of historical order so as to both vary the presentation and to achieve different (e.g. dramatic) effects:

I was reading Chaucer's 'Troilus' the other night, and it suddenly occurred to me to wonder what Chaucer expects / expected us to make of the fact that Criseyde has / had been widowed, whereas Troilus has / had never even been in love. Surely this is significant, yet I have never thought of it before.

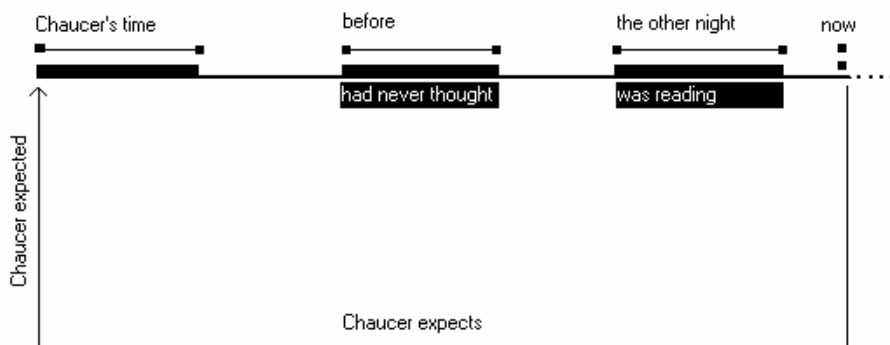


Fig. 1

Here we have the additional complication of an account of a narrative within a narrative (Fig. 1). The account of the narrator's reading and reflection is itself of some complexity: within a period in the past, a durative activity (*reading*) is represented as being interrupted by a sudden thought. But the thought had significance not merely at the time of thinking it nor merely during the rest of the reading period; it is represented as being permanently significant. The appeal to the hearer (*Surely...*) does not connote that *is* refers to the *now* of the speaker and hearer. The narrator is here using the present tense of timeless reference. It is the potentiality for such a use of the present that provided us with the two possibilities, 'Chaucer expects' and 'Chaucer expected'. The latter takes the historical view: a comment of the poet as he wrote in the fourteenth century. The former treats the Chaucer canon as timeless, permanently existing.

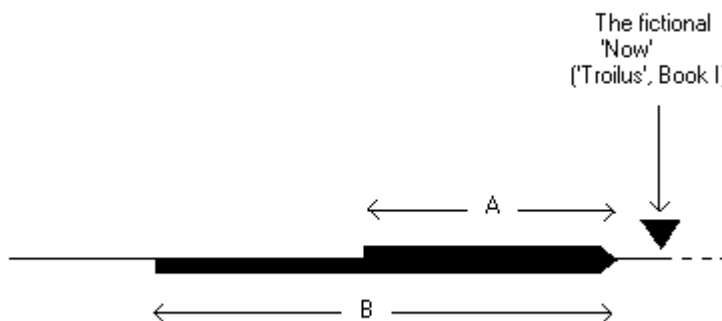


Fig. 2.

An analogous choice exists in referring to the fictional narrative of Chaucer's poem. In Fig. 2, A represents the (unknown) period during which Criseyde has been a widow before the poem begins; B represents the longer period (in effect, Troilus' whole life) during which Troilus has never been in love. It will be noticed that this commentary adopted the 'timeless' view of the fiction ('When the poem *begins*, Criseyde *has been* a widow for some time').

Actually, so both generous and subtle a subject, text analysis is far more intricate than approaching tense complexity in narrative, and can be entirely comprised neither in the very few pages of this paper nor in a whole library, as this matter is conspicuously inexhaustible and open to numberless linguistic analyses. Nevertheless, linguists task is to minutely investigate language phenomena, so as to better capture their mechanisms, to master language – learning abilities, and actually to assist the communication process in its entirety.

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